

F. Contreras, *The Roman Military Fort at the Port of Sanitja*, *Historia de las Islas Baleares*, El Mundo, vol. Nº 16, 2006.

Titus Livius narrated the events of the Roman Conquest of the Balearic Islands in his work *Ad Urbe Condita*. Unfortunately, his book, LX, has not survived and we have only a few quotes from authors that describe, in general terms, the great victory of the Roman General, Quintus Caecilius Metellus, when he reached Rome after conquering the islands which served as his base for a brief period lasting from 123 to 121 B.C. Historians and archaeologists have made efforts to pinpoint the precise moment when Rome decided to incorporate the islands into the Republic and, indeed, as to why.

With no convincing classical records available, we need to turn to archaeology for a better understanding. For this reason the Ecomuseum of the Cap of Cavalleria, founded in 1993, has been excavating the Port of Sanitja in an attempt to discover one of the most important chapters in the history of the Balearics.

Around 123 B.C., Sanitja was the best natural port on the North Coast of Menorca. It was protected from the strong winds from the North (the Tramuntana) by a long, curving arm of land which projects some 200 metres into the sea creating a safe, shallow harbour. The entrance was further protected by the small Island of Porros. In contrast, the other natural bay on the North Coast at nearby Fornells, had a dangerous access. For this reason, Sanitja has been a favourite amongst sailors until recent times.

The Roman site that was established as a result of Quintus Caecilius Metellus Balearicus' military conquest was located on the highest point in the area (15 – 20 metres) at the most strategic place just south of the port. From here, the port and a large area of the northern coast of Menorca can be seen clearly.

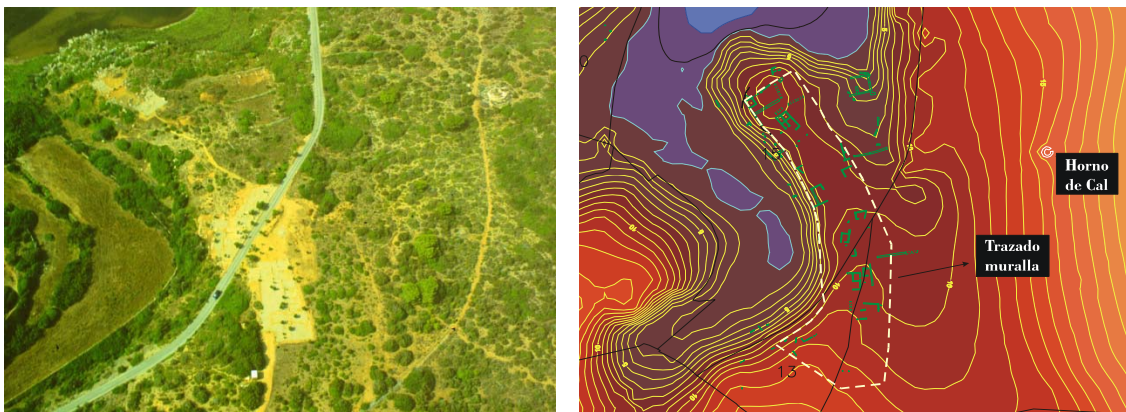
The purpose for the fort's positioning at this site is clear. It was easy to defend and control the port as well as to prevent unwelcome incursions and access to the shore. The layout of the land in this area, in the shape of a promontory, enabled the military fort to use the rocky terrain as a defence system in that the rocky mound that was formed around it provided a natural shield. Only in those areas where this rocky mound was too low to give adequate defence did they build Cyclopic walls to strengthen the weakest points. At heights of seven and eight metres above sea level, we have found parts of the defence network which are as wide as sixty to eighty centimetres.

To better understand the strategic and military importance of the fort at Sanitja one should take a look at other buildings of the same type found in the immediate area. The British watchtower built at the mouth of the port in the 1800's and a group of bunkers dating from the Spanish Civil War are fine examples.

What we can see from the remains of the Roman military site after archaeological excavation is that military control of the port was focused mainly on safeguarding the furthest part of the port. Today this corresponds to grazing land and has a stream of fresh water flowing through it. Over time and with silt deposits accumulating in the area, this land has been claimed from the sea.

The ideal model of how an army should be distributed inside a military fort as proposed by classical authors such as Polibius or Higinus has very little bearing at Sanitja because priority was given to other important matters such as strategic location; the land which was to be defended and visibility all around the area.

If we analyse the plans of the site hypothesizing over the perimeter of its defensive system, we can assume that the camp probably occupied an area of approximately 7,540 square metres. This suggests that Sanitja was rather a small garrison with a relatively small detachment of soldiers. From artefacts recovered from the site and information collected from classical sources, we can trace the moment of the conquest of Sanitja to the year 123 B.C. with an occupation of no more than seventy years. The camp would have been connected by sea routes to similar settlements in strategic locations throughout the Balearics which would have ensured an effective and secure domination of the islands by the Roman Army. The identification of Amphora Tarraconensis which is a replica of the productions of the Italic Amphora Dressel 1 and also the total lack of Terra Sigillata Italica mark the end of the occupation and the abandoning of the military settlement at the port of Sanitja.



We can ascertain what kind of troops manned the garrison from the collection of weapons we have been able to excavate. We have discovered pieces of lead – glandes – and pebble-stones used as slingshot as well as an exceptional pilum or spearhead. We believe that the garrison was made up of around 120 legionnaires of Latin origin who were either lancers - hastate - or front-line soldiers - principes - living alongside local auxiliary troops - axiliae - who, according to classical sources, would be the Balearic Slingers. The discovery of a bronze spur suggests there would have been some form of cavalry at the fort.

Of equal importance to the weapons recovered, we have found remains of Talayotic pottery dating to the Late Republican Period and very reminiscent of products brought from Italica, such as the amphorae which were used to supply the settlement with wine, oil and other staples. The discovery of Talayotic kitchen and table utensils in the military fort, suggest that a close bond had formed between the two cultures – Roman and local – which was based on peaceful co-existence and where the Talayotic culture had come to depend on the new ways which were being introduced to the island.

In all probability, the Balearic Slinger who lived beside the Roman soldier on a daily basis would have been exposed to and absorbed a host of new influences and experiences to do with all walks of Roman life: the way they waged war, their diet, their religion, their language and the many new consumer products which until then had been inaccessible to the islanders.

What precise role did the garrison at Sanitja play after Quintus Caecilius Metellus Balearicus had conquered it in the year 121 B.C.? We can look to archaeological evidence to answer this question. First, we assume that after a swift defeat it fell

under Roman control and then acted mainly as a base for the receiving, recruitment and enrolment into the conquering army of the local population that inhabited the North of Menorca. The reason for this was twofold. On the one hand it dampened the fighting spirit of the young Balearic men and on the other it took advantage of their fighting qualities which could be used in other parts of the Empire.

Second, the military fort would have been a 'centre of formation' for the Balearic Auxiliae that resided at Sanitja. There would have been a programme of daily training which included physical exercise as well as instruction in the use of weapons and perfecting the use of the sling.

Finally, and perhaps of lesser importance, the fort probably served to prevent possible pirate attacks and to safeguard the trading vessels which plied the Mediterranean Sea off the Menorcan coast.

Above we mentioned evidence dating the military occupation of Sanitja. Recently we have discovered information which supports the basis for this reasoning. In 1983, the Menorcan archaeologist, J.C. de Nicolás studied a collection of lead shot found on the island at the port of Sanitja and discovered that two of them bore an inscription which read [S CAE]. Normally, these inscriptions were attributed to the general who commanded the Army and the Balearic Slingers. The inscription [S CAE] refers to Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius who, in support of Sulla, Dictator of the Roman Republic, led a military campaign against Sertorius during the years 83 to 73 B.C.

Using historical archives we traced a piece of lead shot bearing the same markings to an Iberian site known as 'Cerro de la Alegria' very close to Monzón (Huesca) in mainland Spain. The discovery of this piece of shot, along with around seventy other pieces, show that a pitched battle took place on this site somewhere between the years 79 and 76 B.C. and in all probability was related to the civil wars being waged between Sertorius and Quintus Caecilius Metellus Pius.

The discovery of a strata from which were extracted 27 pieces of lead shot and a pilum dating from the first quarter of the I century B.C. as well as evidence of some architectural reorganization at the site tell us that local slingers would have been sent from the fort to the Iberian Peninsula to reinforce Silla's Army and help Q.C.M. Pius defeat the rebel forces led by Sertorius.

To conclude this brief study of the military occupation of the port of Sanitja, it should be noted that as a consequence of the existence of the military fort in Sanitja, there emerged a civilian settlement on the other side of the port. This new town would come to be known as Sanisera as the classical author, Pliny, relates in his works.